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ABSTRACT

Some educators have suggested that compulsory attendance legislation should be eliminated or that the number of required years be reduced. They assert that some students cannot be successful in school and others lack the willingness to learn. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the effect of student attendance and grades. The attendance records and grade-point averages (GPAs) of a total of 995 9th-, 10th- and 11th-graders at Tiffin Columbian High School in Tiffin, Ohio, were analyzed. Findings indicate that gender had no significant effect on the number of days absent or on students' grade-point averages (GPAs). About 10 percent of the students did not attend classes for the required amount of days. A small correlation existed between students' GPAs and the number of days in attendance. The paper concludes that a mandatory attendance policy at the secondary level has little impact on learning. It argues that motivation and ability to learn have greater impacts on academic achievement. The elimination of compulsory education is advocated, with the recommendation that public schools offer 12 free years of education regardless of age so that the individual can choose when he/she is ready to be educated. Four tables are included. (LMI)

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Abstract

For the past one hundred years education has focused on the education of all children. Questions of the ability to teach all children and the desire of some to learn bring skepticism to the idea of educating all youth. Finding no practical correlation between attendance and grade point average destroys the basis of modern attendance policies. The suggestion offered as a conclusion in this paper is twelve free years of education and the individual's choice to decide when they are ready to be educated.

Who Benefits, Mandatory Attendance and Its Relationship to Learning

Educational reform has urged for higher standards, longer school days, and more stringent requirements for graduation. These reforms offer no help for students with attendance problems. These reforms also do little to effect the drop out or "stay in" problems of schools. The Ohio Revised Code requires students to attend school which creates problems for schools and children, especially when considering reform to increase expectations.

The Ohio Revised Code (SC 3321.01) requires all children between the ages of six and eighteen to attend school. Exceptions may include limited cases of the following: religious objection, age and school certificates, purposes of special education, and limited periods of time to perform farm work or other exclusive work for parents. Also, a student with a high school diploma or a student being home schooled, may be excused from compulsory attendance (Baker, 1994). An age and schooling permit can be issued to any student over the age of fourteen for periods of time when school is not in session and any student over the age of sixteen when school is in session. Certain guidelines accompany this certificate. The employer must be willing to state that the student is employed and that the certificate will be returned within two weeks if the student's job is terminated. The child is also to have attended a vocational or special education program to prepare for the work force. A student being excused for farm work may be excused for a period of up to

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five days to perform the work requested by the parent. This five day period may be renewed twice; however, no student is to exceed fifteen days in a school year (Ohio Department of Education, 1977). Another exception would be in case of physical or mental disabilities that are diagnosed by a licensed physician, licensed psychologist, or certified school psychologist. The parent or guardian is ultimately responsible for a child's attendance (Baker, 1994). Schools spend a vast amount of resources enforcing a variety of attendance policies. Unfortunately, the various policies have little effect on raising the level of education even if the student attends.

Purpose

With an understanding of who is to be in school, the focus changes to the reasons everyone is forced to attend. In order to gain a better understanding, a historical background would be useful. Most compulsory attendance laws were enacted around the turn of the century. School administrators of the time were immediately faced with new concerns considering that in 1900 only 6% of Americans had a diploma (Kay, 1991). The Baltimore Superintendent in 1902 stated, "When the school attendance law goes into operation in January, some special provisions will need to be made for... boys who are unmanageable in the regular schools (Tropea, 1987, p.34)." Baltimore was one of many school systems with the belief that compulsory attendance would force problem students to remain in the classroom. To avoid the exclusion of students, special classrooms were created. Schools simply changed from the exclusion of individuals to in-school segregation of individuals. In 1909 a Philadelphia administrator stated, "The pupil who failed to keep step

with his fellows, or who, because of physical or moral defect seriously interfered with the regular work of a class, tended to dropout, or to be forced out, of school and the problem of the exceptional child disappeared with him (Tropea, 1987, p. 42)." The attitude that, "Some students can not be successful - but the reasons differ", led to the classification of students for specific special classrooms. In 1912, the Detroit School system instituted a testing and placement program for those students having or creating problems. The testing was an attempt to separate the unmanageable from the unsuccessful. Approximately thirty percent of the students not passing were placed in a manual curriculum. This switch, that began in approximately 1915, led to the development of vocational education in the twenties and thirties (Tropea, 1987). The early 1900's to the thirties brought about huge changes in the mentality of administration of public schools. School changed from a mentality of, "We have to keep these problem students", to, "Since we have these students lets teach them what we can." The issue of how to educate special students is a major theme in education today.

Nationally we have the concept that everyone should get through high school. This theme is a major part of the problem with our educational system. America has focused on the drop out problem when a closer look may suggest the problem in education is the "stay-in" problem. An important fact to remember is it's not where students come from that determines school climate, but their willingness to work and their goals. In order to be successful with educational reforms some students should drop-out. A student's attendance in school does not mean that that student is learning.

There has to be the will to learn before learning can take place (Toby, 1989). Even with the increased attendance and the increased graduation rates over the last one hundred years, education is relatively the same. A glaring example of this is the release of students for farm work in an extremely industrialized society. Our culture has change but the reasons for excused absences have not changed. Another example of limited change in education is home quarantine. This has become almost unheard of in recent years. These outdated excuses for absences continue on while a problem like the "school tired" student is not addressed. One reason for this phenomenon is the direction of the political system of the United States versus the educational system. The educational system has been very fixed, forcing conformity with few significant choices for students. The political system has granted individual autonomy and offered individual choices. Perhaps the message being sent to children is "aspire to what you want; expect to have what you want; the good life is for everyone (Cole, 1992, p. 339)." Education needs to offer students the freedom to move around and allow real choices (Kay, 1991). A real life choice is the choice not to attend school. Education may need to consider offering twelve free years of education and eliminate compulsory attendance (Wolfthal, 1986). The choice of twelve free years of education if the individual desires may eliminate our "stay-in" problem. Students present at school would be at school because they feel the need for education. This desire or realization of the need to learn would allow education the ability to reform and raise the level of expectation for all students (Toby, 1989). Michael Gazzaniga stated, "Children who learn a skill in

the presence of external rewards seldom use it, while the other children, exposed to it in an unsupervised environment, go on to enjoy and use their new-found ability... since in the former the skill was not perceived as an act they freely engaged in, it did not become part of their personal system (Kay, 1991, p. 10)."

When the suggestion of eliminating compulsory attendance is voiced many people believe children will be running the streets and not come to school. Concerns of what to do with this mass of children is probably an unwarranted concern. Five states set the upper limit of compulsory attendance at age fifteen or less, while four states have the set the age at eighteen. The attendance rates differ between these two groups by only five percent. This suggests that school attendance would not change greatly if reduced or eliminated. In fact, education could reallocate resources currently being wasted on these students to improve the quality of education (Toby, 1989).

Summary

The number of educators suggesting to reduce or eliminate compulsory attendance continues to increase as do the number of students that are not reaching their potential. This study attempts to show that due to the "stay in" problem of schools mandatory attendance has a limited effect on learning. The questions to be answered are:

1. Do boys and girls differ in number of days present?
2. Do boys and girls differ by grade point average?
3. Does a mandatory attendance policy compel students to attend?

4. Is there a correlation between the number of days not in attendance and grade point average?

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this study were freshmen, sophomores, and juniors at Tiffin Columbian High School in the year 1993-94. All student in these grades that were on the enrollment list at the end of the 1993-94 school year was included. The total number of students involved was 995, of which 455 were male and 440 were female. Tiffin is a very representative North West Ohio City. The school system has approximately 3900 student with about two-thirds of those students attending further education. The drop-out rate for the Tiffin City schools is about four percent.

Measures/Procedures

A student's grade point average was matched up with gender and the number of days not in attendance during the 1993-94 school year. The number of days absent did not include any period of time when a student was involved in a school function but not in school. However, any time a student was absent for more then one hour they were considered absent for half of a day. All half days were combined into the total number of days (two half days made a full day and an odd number of half days was reduced by half a day). The data was entered and calculated by the Bowling Green State University Statistical Consulting Center.

Results

Boys' attendance versus Girls'

The statistical analysis of the data provided a mean of 8.22 for boys with an 11.443 standard deviation. The females had a mean of 9.4 and a standard deviation of 12.6. A separate variance estimate yielded a t value of 1.46 with a two-tailed probability of .14.

Table 1

Boys, girls, and grade point average

The analysis of individual grade point averages produced a mean of 2.2795 for males with a standard deviation of .89227 and a mean of 2.5553 for females with a standard deviation of .83292. A separate and pooled variance estimate produced a t value of 4.78 with a two-tailed probability of less than .0001.

Table 2

Mandatory attendance

An attendance policy is in place At Columbian High School that sets twenty days of absence as the maximum barring extenuating medical situations. In a review of records less than .4 percent of the students in this study are considered to have extenuating medical problems that led to absences in excess of the twenty days provided. With this small exception, 10.5 percent of the students at Columbian did not attend classes the required number of days and were forced to receive no credit due to excessive absences. A total of 94 of the 893 students were not compelled to attend school on a regular basis.

In order to be attending on a regular basis a student must be in school 90 percent of the days that were scheduled.

Table 3

Correlation between grade point average and attendance

The analysis of the data resulted in a Pearson r of $-.41$ and a two-tailed significance of $.01$ with degrees of freedom equal to 893 . The Kendall Tau produced a value of $-.24$ with probability of less than $.001$. Squaring the Kendall Tau value of $-.24$ produced a common variance of 5.7 percent.

Table 4

Discussion

As expected there is a statistical correlation between grade point average and the number of days in attendance; however, the correlation is surprisingly small. This fact, coupled with the facts that mandatory attendance policy and law have little affect on students to attend, confirms the conclusion that compulsory attendance at the secondary level has little to do with learning. At Tiffin Columbian a person's gender would seem to have a greater impact on grade point average than the number of days present. Males on average have a grade point that is a third of a letter grade lower than females.

Since being present does not have a strong correlation on grade point the next logical conclusion is that motivation or desire to learn

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and ability have a greater impact on an individual's grade point average. For this reason, compulsory attendance should be eliminated allowing students with the motivation and ability to benefit from the limited resources available in education. The 10.5 percent that do not see the need for education should be given the option of attempting to succeed in life without high school education.

In conclusion, I believe that compulsory attendance of teenage students benefits nobody and should be eliminated. Education should offer twelve free years of education regardless of age and allow people to take advantage of education when their motivation is at a level that education seems important. When focusing on creating a motivation to learn little learning can take place; however, when the focus is teaching individuals, the level of education will rise dramatically.

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Table 1

Number of Days absent for Males and Females

Males

Number	Mean	Stand. Dev.	Stand. Error
455	8.2264	11.443	.536

Females

Number	Mean	Stand. Dev.	Stand. Error
440	9.4045	12.606	.601

F Value	Two-tail Prob.
1.21	.041

Pooled Variance Estimate

t value	Degrees of Freedom	Two-tailed Prob.
-1.46	893	.143

Separate Variance Estimate

t value	Degrees of Freedom	Two-tailed Prob.
-1.46	878.19	.144

Table 2

Males and Females as Relates to Grade Point Average

Males

Number	Mean	Stand. Dev.	Stand. Error
455	2.27956	.89227	.04183

Females

Number	Mean	Stand. Dev.	Stand. Error
440	2.55534	.83292	.03971

F Value	Two-tail Prob.
1.15	.147

Pooled Variance Estimate

t value	Degrees of Freedom	Two-tailed Prob.
-4.78	893	.001

Separate Variance Estimate

t value	Degrees of Freedom	Two-tailed Prob.
-4.78	891.89	.001

Table 3

# of Days Absent	Percentage of Students
0-5	50.7%
0-19	89.5%
0-31	95.2%
0-34	96.0%
0-43	98.0%
44-99+	2.0%

Table 4

